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Introduction

Over the past two decades, I have had the good fortune of encountering Kant's writings on ethics from three distinct perspectives: as a student, both undergraduate and graduate; as a teacher of Kant's ethics; and as a philosophical scholar attracted to Kant's ethics but also genuinely troubled by the objections that are raised against it.

This book is intended to serve readers who come from each of these perspectives. In particular, I hope that this book will fill a longstanding gap in the literature on Kant's ethics. In addition to Kant's own voluminous writings on ethics, there is now an even more voluminous body of scholarly literature on Kant's ethics, written in German, English, and other languages, comprised of hundreds of books and thousands of published articles. In one way, this large body of scholarly literature is a blessing to students, teachers, and scholars. Kant's philosophy is notoriously difficult to penetrate, packed full of obscure jargon, cryptically organized, and informed by assumptions Kant often does not bother to highlight. Fair to say, then, that Kant achieved his greatness as a philosopher despite, rather than because of, the style and presentation of his works. And since his moral philosophy is no exception to this overall tendency, this large body of scholarly literature (we might hope) should help readers of Kant's ethics to grasp at least the main ideas and insights that Kant offers.

Regrettably, the existing scholarly literature does not altogether fulfill this hope. For one, much of this literature succumbs to gross oversimplification. Introductory textbooks on ethical theory, for example, often reduce or distort core Kantian ideas, depicting it as a

morality focused on 'good intentions' or acting on the basis of broad, exceptionless rules. On the other hand, much of the literature is unhelpful to newcomers to Kant's ethics in particular because it sticks too close to Kant's own language and presentation. I firmly believe that getting a foothold in Kant's ethics requires us to acknowledge Kant's shortcomings as a philosophical stylist, seeing Kant's style not as a feature of his philosophy to be admired but as an obstacle we need to work around. Unfortunately, much of the scholarly literature does not take this difficulty seriously enough, and, as a result, does not help newcomers to Kant's ethical works ascertain the assumptions and motivations that drive Kant's writings on ethics. Hence, those who read this literature often leave it with no deeper understanding of Kant's ethics than they could glean from their own reasonably careful reading of Kant's own ethical texts. As a result, there is not, in my estimation and in the estimation of many philosophers I know, a piece of secondary literature to assist readers, particularly those new to Kant or to moral philosophy, in grasping the main claims and overall significance of Kant's ethics.

This book aims to fill that role. However, I have striven to give readers more than an acquaintance with, or conceptual mastery of, the main claims or arguments Kant makes. I have written the book to try to help readers perceive why Kant's ethics is viewed as a viable candidate for the true (or the best) philosophical theory of morality. The book is therefore best described as an opinionated analytical introduction: opinionated, in that I try to present Kant's moral theory not in a neutral way, but to defend the theory in a sympathetic way; analytical, because it seeks to relate the various components of Kant's ethics to one another and to his moral theory as a whole; and an introduction, because it presupposes little if any familiarity with Kant's ethics. As will emerge in these pages, Kant

was hardly infallible in his thinking about morality. Nevertheless, he articulated and integrated insights about morality that many thoughtful, reflective people can recognize and embrace.

This book thus differs from other secondary literature on Kant's ethics in some crucial respects. First, it is not a 'big book' on Kant's moral philosophy that tries to offer a careful, textually based interpretation of all the elements of Kant's moral philosophy. Hence, there is a substantial portion of Kant's writings on ethics and related areas that I will not touch upon. I will have fairly little to say, for instance, about Kant's anthropology, philosophy of religion, political philosophy, or philosophy of history, all of which inform his theory of morality.

Second, Kant was a deeply systematic philosopher. He did not theorize about ethics in isolation from his theorizing about metaphysics, human knowledge, cognition, nature, etc. No doubt a thorough grasp of Kant's ethics demands a thorough grasp of the other elements of his philosophical system. However, this book assumes that readers know little about Kant's philosophical enterprise as a whole and thus attempts to outline and motivate his ethics with minimal reference to non-ethical texts or ideas. Admittedly, this complicates the task of understanding Kant's ethics, and there are certain topics (for example, Kant's discussion of freedom of the will) where claims from elsewhere in Kant's philosophy cannot be avoided. Still, my aim has been, to the extent possible, to present Kant's ethics as a freestanding theory.

Third, a book such as this must confront the fact that the work through which virtually everyone is introduced to Kant's ethics is his Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. The Groundwork sets the agenda of the early portions of this book inasmuch its

early chapters are oriented around the Groundwork's central project: identifying and establishing the supreme principle of morality. That said, this book is not intended to be a commentary on the Groundwork, and it presents Kant's ethical thinking in ways that diverge significantly from their presentation in the Groundwork. Most notably, in the Groundwork, the first version of his supreme principle of morality that Kant presents is the Formula of Universal Law. Here, the first version I present of that principle is the Formula of Humanity. This deviation from Kant's own approach in the Groundwork is nevertheless warranted. The Formula of Humanity plays a larger role in texts besides the Groundwork, tends to be less technical and abstract than the Formula of Universal Law, and provides a roadmap for Kant's account of our moral duties.

Furthermore, while the Groundwork is indispensable to understanding Kant's moral philosophy, it is likely to give an incomplete, if not outright misleading, picture of Kant's ethical thought when read in isolation. It is therefore unfortunate that many never engage at all with Kant's other ethical texts, for there are important components of his ethical thought that Kant does not discuss in the Groundwork. That text says little, for instance, about moral psychology, the details of our moral duties, or key institutions such as marriage or punishment. The Groundwork has the advantage of being relatively brief and directed at core questions in Kant's ethics. Still, it is a work of limited aims or scope, and therefore readers whose sole understanding of Kant's ethics comes from that work get a similarly limited understanding of Kant's ethics. Thus, when (in my estimation) a central Kantian claim or insight can be articulated solely by reference to the Groundwork, I refer to that text alone. However, I make liberal use of other Kantian texts when the Groundwork is either silent or sketchy concerning the matter at hand. Especially important here will be

Kant's Metaphysics of Morals, the work for which the Groundwork was intended as preparatory. (Kant's Critique of Practical Reason plays a prominent role in [Chapter 5](#) and in [Section 8.8](#).) My hope is that readers familiar with the Groundwork will thereby come to a more thorough understanding of Kant's ethics without having to plow through the entirety of Kant's ethical writings. That said, I also hope that readers will be inspired to see the value of reading outside the Groundwork in order to understand Kant's ethics.

For instructors responsible for teaching Kant's ethics, especially those who are not scholars of Kant's ethics, this book provides a way to organize one's thinking about Kant's ethics, and, by extension, a way to organize the teaching of Kant's ethics. Many students come to Kant's ethics with little or no background in Kant's philosophy or in philosophical ethics. They thus understandably struggle to get a toehold on Kant's ethics and often become overly reliant on their instructor's exposition of Kant's texts. There is of course no substitute for students' grappling with those texts. Still, Kant's idiosyncratic style, need for systematicity, etc., are a recipe for frustration, and this book is intended to ameliorate that frustration without replacing the experience of reading Kant's texts directly. Students should also benefit from the fact that I have attempted to draw contrasts with other ethical theories with which students may be familiar (utilitarianism, virtue ethics, intuitionism, etc.).

The book is divided into two parts. [Part I](#) consists of five chapters that begin with Kant's stated aim in the Groundwork: to identify and defend the supreme principle of morality. One puzzling feature of the Groundwork is that though its first two sections have the same general aim – to identify and defend the Categorical Imperative as the supreme principle of morality – Kant deploys very different argumentative strategies in those

sections. Hence, [Chapter 1](#) sets the stage for the first two sections of the Groundwork by setting out the criteria Kant believed this supreme principle must satisfy. We then turn in [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) to the two aforementioned versions of Kant's supreme principle, the Categorical Imperative. [Chapter 2](#) addresses the Formula of Humanity, [Chapter 3](#) the Formula of Universal Law. Throughout [Part I](#), I articulate an understanding of Kant's theory of value and how this theory of value provides the underpinning for Kant's Categorical Imperative. As I see it, *rational agency* is the central value for Kant, and his Formula of Humanity and Formula of Universal Law represent or express two distinct ways in which rational agency ought to be valued. [Chapter 4](#) outlines an important moral concept Kant introduces in the Groundwork: dignity. Appeals to dignity have become popular recently in ethics, but Kant's contributions to these contemporary discussions are sometimes obscure. [Chapter 5](#) takes up perhaps the most vexing issues in Kant's ethics: namely, how Kant understands human freedom and its relationship to morality and to the Categorical Imperative.

In [Part II](#), the emphasis turns from exegesis to defense. Over the past two centuries, Kant's ethics has been subject to innumerable criticisms, more than I can answer here. However, there seem to be certain criticisms that recur and trouble even those otherwise sympathetic to Kant's ethics. [Part II](#) groups these objections into three broad categories and gives a spirited but (I hope) fair-minded defense of Kant's ethics against these objections. The first chapter of this section ([Chapter 6](#)) addresses three objections concerning the Formula of Universal Law: first, that because we are unable to determine what principles a person acts upon, we cannot determine whether her actions are morally permissible; second, that the Formula of Universal Law gives us implausible verdicts about

particular actions; and third, that it implies an implausible sort of absolutism where acts of a given kind (for example, lying) are always wrong. Addressing these objections will also help answer a vexed question in Kantian ethics, namely, the relations among the different formulations of the Categorical Imperative and their supposed equivalence. [Chapter 7](#) addresses three areas where Kant's ethical views have been seen as having problematic implications: sexual conduct, suicide, and our treatment of non-human animals. The final chapter, [Chapter 8](#), answers three criticisms resting on the claim that Kant's ethics assigns reason too prominent a place at the expense of sympathy or other sentiments: first, that Kant's ethics rests on an unrealistic or unattractive moral psychology, wherein we should strive to expunge all sentiment or emotion from our moral deliberation and strive to be motivated purely by austere rational considerations; second, that Kantian ethics does not take due account of the special moral significance we ascribe to our relationships with our friends, family, and loved ones; and third, that Kant's ethics fails to offer a defensible model of a happy or well-lived human life and the role of morality in such a life. Answering this latter objection leads to a brief discussion of another of Kant's central moral ideals, the Kingdom of Ends, as well a consideration of Kant's 'practical postulates.'

For philosophers and scholars of Kant's ethics, there is obviously a great deal here that is familiar and (I expect) uncontroversial. Nevertheless, they too stand to benefit inasmuch as few books attempt to make the case for Kant's ethics, or at least its central claims or principles, in a direct and compact way. I do defend certain interpretive claims that may strike some scholars as novel, though, in the end, I hope that such scholars will find these interpretations both provocative and plausible. Of particular interest to scholars are my criterial approach to the supreme principle of morality, my emphasis on Kant as a

theorist of value, my analysis of respect as the attitude underlying the Formula of Humanity, and my ‘rational contradiction’ interpretation of the Formula of Universal Law.

In the end, I do not expect readers of this book to conclude that Kant’s ethics is unproblematic. Rather, I hope this will function as the book I wish I could have had when I first encountered Kant’s ethics: a book that does not attempt to indoctrinate, but attempts to make the case for Kant’s ethical theory being worthy of study and appreciation as much as it makes the case for the correctness of the theory itself. Philosophy students in particular need to know not only *what* Kant said about morality and *why*. They also need to better appreciate *why what he said matters* – why, for example, philosophers as estimable as John Rawls admired it, or why historically prominent philosophers such as Hegel or Mill saw Kant’s ethics as worth criticizing. As I have learned through teaching Kant’s ethics – to date, I have taught Kant’s ethics, in lesser or greater depth, in about forty academic courses over a fifteen year span – understanding Kant’s ethics and understanding its value or importance are inextricably linked.

Let me conclude this preface with some guidance about how best to read this book.

Although the book as a whole functions as an argumentative brief on behalf of Kantian ethics, I have tried, to the extent possible, to make each chapter sufficiently free standing that it can be read (or re-read) without referring to material earlier or later in the book. Hence, those wanting insight about certain topics (for example, the Formula of Humanity) should be able to consult the relevant chapter ([Chapter 2](#), in this case) without having to read from cover to cover.

Each chapter concludes with a list of recommended 'Further Readings.' These were selected not only for their quality, but also to give readers the opportunity to explore perspectives on Kant's ethics different from my own.

Further Reading

Among the more useful introductions to Kant's ethics are Bruce Aune's Kant's Theory of Morals (Princeton, 1979) and Roger Sullivan's An Introduction to Kant's Ethics (Cambridge, 1994). Jennifer Uleman's An Introduction to Kant's Moral Philosophy (Cambridge, 2010) emphasizes Kant's theory of the will and moral psychology. More advanced overviews of Kant's ethics can be found in Allen Wood's Kant's Ethical Thought (Cambridge, 1999) and Kantian Ethics (Cambridge, 2007). Readers interested in placing Kant's ethics in historical context will profit from the chapters on Kant's ethics in John Rawls' Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy (Harvard, 2000). Some shorter, essay-length introductions to Kant's ethics include [chapter 7](#) of Mark Timmons' Moral Theory (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); David Velleman's "Reading Kant's Groundwork," in G. Sher (ed.), Ethics: Essential Readings in Moral Theory (Routledge, 2012); Christine Korsgaard's 'Introduction' to the Groundwork in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy series (Cambridge, 2012); and Andrews Reath, "Contemporary Kantian ethics," in J. Skorupski (ed.), Routledge Companion to Ethics (Routledge, 2012). Marcia Baron's contribution ("Kantian ethics") to Three Methods of Ethics (Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), pp. 3–91, is a useful argumentative defense of Kantian ethics that engages with its chief theoretical rivals: consequentialism and virtue ethics. J.B. Schneewind's "Autonomy,

obligation, and virtue: An overview of Kant's moral philosophy," in P. Guyer (ed.), Cambridge Companion to Kant (Cambridge, 1992) is an introduction to Kant's moral philosophy emphasizing autonomy and virtue. Arnulf Zweig, "Reflections on the enduring value of Kant's ethics," in T.E. Hill (ed.), Blackwell Guide to Kant's Ethics (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) helps readers see the many threads that intertwine in Kant's ethical theorizing. Readers seeking more line-by-line commentary on Kant's Groundwork can consult Paul Guyer, Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Critical Guide (Continuum, 2007); Jens Timmermann, Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary (Cambridge, 2010); and Henry Allison, Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary (Oxford, 2011). Sally Sedgwick's Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: An Introduction (Cambridge, 2008) is an especially useful introduction to that work that helps situate Kant's ethics within his larger philosophical enterprise.